DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 439 PS 030 411

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Weiner, Dana |
| TITLE | The Transition of Gambian Children to New York City Public Schools. |
| PUB DATE | 2002-05-00 |
| NOTE | 23p. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Research (143) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC01 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Childhood Attitudes; Comparative Analysis; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Foreign Countries; Immigrants; Interviews; *Multicultural Education; Parent Attitudes; Parents; *Student Adjustment; Student Needs; *Teacher Student Relationship |
| IDENTIFIERS | Gambia; *New York City Board of Education |

ABSTRACT

Noting the need to develop strategies to ease the transition of children from families recently arriving in the United States from Gambia into the public school system in New York City, this paper compares the school life in Gambia with that of Bronx, New York. Information on school life in Gambia was obtained through literature and through interviews of 2 parents and 4 children, ages 8 to 10 years, from Gambia presently living in the Bronx. The paper describes the typical school life of a Gambian child and notes that most students finish schooling at the age of 16. The deplorable conditions in boarding school are also described. Interviews with children revealed that they recalled similar experiences from their early childhood in Gambia, preferred school life in New York City, but missed certain aspects of their home country. Descriptions of the students' educational activities in Gambia and the United States and participation in Arabic School in the United States illustrate difficulties in making the transition to a new country, in learning a new language, and fitting into a new culture. Parents suggested strategies to ease the transition of Gambian children, including employing African teachers and teaching about Africa in the school. Additional strategies suggested in the paper include teaching children in their native language while they gradually learn English, allowing children to attend Arabic School after regular school instruction, and incorporating Internet technology into multicultural lessons. (Contains 10 references.) (KB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 465 439

# The Transition of Gambian Children to New York City Public Schools.

Dana Weiner

May 2002

PS 030411

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Dana Weiner





BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Transition of Gambian Children to New York City Public Schools

By Dana Weiner

**Abstract**

In an attempt to help ease the transition of African children into the New York City public school system, school life in Gambia, Africa was compared to that of the Bronx, New York. Two parents and four children from Gambia who are presently living in the Bronx were interviewed. All were orally interviewed in an informal setting. Subjects were asked questions about what school life was like for them in their native country. From this information I was able to develop strategies to help teachers ease the transition of Gambian children into the New York City public school system, and perhaps, other school systems across the country.

**Introduction**

Within the past few decades, there has been an incredible surgence of immigrant children into the New York City public school systems. New York City schools have experienced a 49% increase in non-English speaking immigrants in six years. Over 75% of all New York City school teachers have non-English speakers in their classroom (Hornblower & Blackman, 1995, p.42). The issue of the education of immigrant children has been a topic of much interest and debate over the past few years.

There has been an incredible influx of Gambian families into the area where I teach in the South Bronx. Many come straight from Africa, not knowing a single word of English. But, they all come here with hopes of a better life, if not for them, for their children.

As a New York City public school teacher, I have seen just about every type of inequity possible with regards to the education of our children. Some have solutions, some do not. I believe that the issue of the transition and education of African children into New York City public schools is one that has been greatly overlooked. Very little is being done to help these children successfully assimilate into our schools. These children are left on their own to fend for

PS 030411

themselves. As the population of African children in our schools begins to grow, what can we do to help them adjust to their school life in a brand new country?

When I first started to work at my school, I was amazed at how well the African families kept to their customs and traditions. The women wear beautiful headdresses and brightly patterned green, yellow and red African wraps that symbolize their heritage. The men often wear short, colorful round hats with a flat top. They wear sandals on their feet, even in the winter.

During my first year as a teacher, I had two African children in my class. One little girl from Gambia wore the same headdress that the older women wore. She was a very shy and timid little girl. She seemed to be very uncomfortable in her own skin. When other children asked her about her headdress, she became very uncomfortable and started to cry. She had moved to the Bronx from Gambia just two years earlier.

The other African child that I had in my class was a young boy, also from Gambia. Although he did not dress in traditional African clothing, all of the children knew that he was African because his mother dressed in traditional African garb. This little boy did anything and everything to be "American." When we would discuss Africa in our classroom, he would deny that he was African. When his mother came to pick him up, he would run away from her in embarrassment.

Issues like this have begun to intensify as the years go by and more and more Gambian children enter my school. This year, I have six African children in my classroom, five of which are from Gambia. That is about average for any given classroom in my school.

Although the two children from my first year of teaching had the most severe and heart-wrenching responses to being Gambian, or to what they viewed as being different, most of the Gambian children that I have had since then have had similar problematic issues with their identity. This is what has compelled me to write this paper.

**African School Life**

In an internet article titled "A Dreadful Place", Warou described the typical school life of a Gambian child (1998, www.uic.edu/classes/engl.htm). He referred to the school that he attended to as the "Hill". The Hill was a tiny school built on a hill during colonial times. It had six classrooms made of stone with thatch roofs. All of the teachers lived in small round huts located on school grounds. The school garden was behind the classrooms and was well kept by the pupils. The entire school was surrounded by wire netting.

Gambian children begin to attend Primary School at the age of seven. Primary School last for six years. When students are thirteen, they graduate on to Middle Secondary School. Middle Secondary School lasts for three years. When they are sixteen, Students are awarded a Middle School Leaving Certificate (International Association of Universities/UNESCO). Most students do not make it past this point. As of 1998, the literacy rate in Gambia was 39% (hmnet.com/africa/gambia/gambia.html).

Before Warou was old enough to attend school, he was mesmerized by what seemed to be a wonderful place to learn. All children in Gambia are taught English in Primary School. English is the official language of Gambia, but before children are old enough to begin school, they are usually spoken to in their native dialect. "When the school boys came back home they spoke a strange language we didn't understand. For me, going to school to learn a new language was the most important thing in life" (1998, www.uic.edu/classes/engl.htm).

When Warou turned seven, he quickly realized that the Hill was not at all the place he expected it to be. He described the Hill as being a "terrible place". "Everything, every movement, was governed by rules. If those rules were broken, the penalties were severe" (1998, www.uic.edu/classes/engl.htm).

Warou spoke of one teacher who savagely beat students. One day he nearly killed a young girl with his whip because she spoke in her native dialect. That

was strictly forbidden. The author himself was once kicked to the ground and beaten because he left the room without asking permission.

After students completed their classwork, they had to weed the garden and water the plants. If they did not comply, they were put in detention on Sundays. Detention often consisted of working all day without being able to eat anything.

As I read the Warou article, my heart sunk. I had no idea of the degree of differences between Gambian and American schools. As I read on, I was a little more at ease because the author described home life as being "a completely different world from school life". He found relaxation and comfort at the end of the day as he climbed down the hill to go back home to the village. Home was his sanctuary away from school.

The same article had a small passage from a young Gambian woman named Aissa. Like all other Gambian children, at the age of seven, she began primary school. She was an extremely bright young girl and was known by all in her village for being very gifted. In 1981, when she was thirteen, she graduated on to Middle Secondary School.

To her native tribe, marriage is considered very important, even compulsory. The typical age for a girl to be married was fifteen. Even though she was doing extraordinarily well in school, the day she turned fifteen, her father demanded she be married. The marriage would be arranged by her father (1998, www.uic.edu/classes/engl.htm).

Aissa fought with her father because this was not what she wanted. She did not even know the man that she was going to marry. She wanted to continue on with school, but marriage would prevent her from doing so. But, being an obedient Gambian daughter, Aissa gave in to her father's demands and married at the age of fifteen, just as most Gambian girls do.

An article titled "From Trauma to Truth" depicts the life of a six-year old West African boy attending a Gambian boarding school in the early 1970's. Under Christian and Missionary Alliance rules, he could no longer stay with his parents when he turned six. He was sent over 300 miles away from his family, and could

only communicate with them through letters. He was strictly forbidden from writing anything negative about the school or the officials. Penalties were severe (Kennedy, 1998, p.16).

Darr and at least thirty other children at this Gambian boarding school were physically and mentally tortured. "From 1960 to 1974, children were beaten with belts, forced to eat their own vomit, punched and slapped in the face, coerced into performing oral sex, required to sit in their own feces, fondled, and beaten with a strap to the point of bleeding" (Kennedy, 1998, p.16).

Although this particular child's experience took place in the 1970's, there is much evidence that many boarding schools are still continuing these horrifying practices. "Many children are now coming forward with stories of similar abuse at West African boarding schools" (Kennedy, 1998, p.20).

A decade ago, most parents and officials balked when they first heard reports of abuse. They didn't believe their children. "Parents had been thoroughly brainwashed into thinking that their children were being taken care of by wonderful, dedicated people" (Kennedy, 1998, p.20).

Only within the past few years have these allegations been taken seriously and investigated. Little has been done to change current conditions. "To rectify the past, we must safeguard the future. We must teach leaders how to detect child abuse, conduct thorough background checks on employees, and publicly discipline convicted abusers" (Kennedy, 1998, p.20).

**Transition to the United States**

In an article titled "Child of Africa", Rogers speaks of the transition from Africa to America. When she was seven, her family decided to move to the United States in search of a better life. In this article, the author reflects on this time in her life.

"Who knows what goes on in the mind of a seven year old? Does it really register that you are taking one of the biggest steps in your life? I scarcely remember whether or not I felt a sense of pain or even a sense of loss" (Rogers,

2001, p.20). She vaguely remembers the move, but clearly remembers the pain of the transition period once she reached the United States.

Her family spoke an African dialect, so no one knew what they were saying, and they had no way of communicating with anyone. Everything was done through hand gestures. This was extremely difficult and frustrating. Simple things that we don't even think twice about were also difficult for the author. For her, Americans drove on the opposite side of the road, light-switches were upside-down, students didn't have to wear uniforms in school, nobody referred to their teachers as "sir", and what on earth were sneakers?

The author states that she never really felt that she fit in with the U.S. schools. "The child of Africa that I was will never go away, and I will always have a love for Africa and its people (Rogers, 2001, p.20). She felt alienated and uncomfortable in U.S. schools. After a year of trying public schooling, she began home schooling as a last resort. She said that it was the best thing that could have happened to her.

I found this young lady's experience to be disheartening. "Even with bilingual classroom aides and ESL training, children who are plunged into the English environment before they are fluent are just left out of the discussion in their mainstream classes" (Hornblower & Blackman, 1995, p.43). I have one student in my classroom this year who came straight from Africa and spoke no English. When I read this statement, it was as if it came straight from my mouth. I have seen this first hand. It is very true.

**Issues**

African children are literally plunged into a new society and a new language. The fact that they have spent their lives being familiar with a different language and different customs is completely overlooked.

There has been much debate over whether immigrant children should be instructed entirely in English. The issue has taken on national dimensions. In 1995, Senate majority leader Robert Dole stated that "We must stop the practice

of multilingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride or as a therapy for low self-esteem." In 1998, Congressional budget proposals wanted to slash bilingual education funding by as much as 66% (Hornblower & Blackman, 1995, p.40).

A study done in 1993 by Ramirez points toward an increasingly common consensus. "Children learn faster and are more likely to excel academically if they are given several years of instruction in their native language first" (Ramirez, 1993, p.20). Ramirez believes that it is a myth that if you want children to learn English, you should give them nothing but English. He believes in incorporating both languages.

A long-term study done by Collier in 1994 compared the performance of 42,000 non-English speaking students over thirteen years. Collier found that children who had six years of bilingual education in well-designed programs performed far better on standardized English tests in eleventh grade.

"Children who are plunged into an English environment before they are fluent are just left out of the discussion in their mainstream classes. It shows up in the long term, when academic going gets tough" (Collier, 1994, p.41). I have seen this problem first hand. I have had children sit in my classroom and have no idea of what is going on because of a language barrier. This is no way to educate children.

From this research, I believe that there are several main issues that need to be dealt with in regards to the transition of Gambian children into New York City public schools. I would like to focus in on easing the transition by looking at ways that we can help Gambian children maintain and respect their culture, but at the same time, feel comfortable and happy in their new surroundings. I will also research whether teaching African children in their native language as well as English is a more efficient way for children to learn.

## A Survey

In an attempt to help ease the transition of African children into the New York City public school system, I will compare and contrast school life in Gambia, Africa to that of the Bronx, New York. I interviewed both parents and children from Gambia who are presently living in the Bronx. From this information I was able to develop strategies to help teachers ease the transition of Gambian children into the New York City public school system, and perhaps, other school systems across the country. I am aware of Gambian immigrants in other major cities through previous talks with former students.

## Subjects

The source of my subjects is four Gambian children from my elementary school. Two of the subjects were male, and two were female. They ranged in age from eight to ten years old. All four students were born in Africa and moved to New York City at some point in their early childhood. I chose these four students because they are very verbal and particularly fluent in English.

I also interviewed two of the parents of these four students. One was male and one was female. They ranged in age from twenty-eight to forty-three years old. Both were born and raised in Gambia. I did not include all of the parents of the students because not all of them speak English. All of the subjects I chose spoke an adequate amount of English.

I set up appointments with my subjects during my teacher preparation periods. I orally interviewed one subject at a time in my classroom. I asked each parent sixteen questions and each student was asked six questions. Each interview took approximately thirty minutes. Students will be referred to as Student A, Student B, Student C and Student D. Parents will be referred to as Parent 1 and Parent 2.

## Results

All of the children that I interviewed recalled similar experiences from their early childhood in Gambia. They all stated that they currently prefer school life in New York City, but some do miss certain aspects of their home country. Their parents are very happy to be living in this country. They felt very blessed to be a part of American society.

### Student A

The first student I interviewed (Student A) was five years old when he moved to the United States. His family originally settled in Brooklyn, but moved to the South Bronx one year later. He is now ten years old. He was easily able to recollect what school life used to be like for him in Africa.

Student A went to a school that resembled a small house. "It was one level high with a flat roof. The school had six classrooms. Each class had around ten or fifteen children in it." The classrooms were very small and dimly lit. Each room only had a few round light bulbs to light it. Each child had their own desk that was attached to a chair. The walls were brown and not adorned with any posters or children's work. Every child was required to wear a uniform. If a child came in wearing something other than the school uniform, they would be sent home.

The school was located on a rural road surrounded by several trees. There was no playground or area to play outside the school. "We did not have books like we do here. We had book that looked like binders. Lots of pages were torn out or missing, but the books were used year after year."

A typical school day consisted of a long period of instruction and then a break for lunch. "Every child in the school received free lunch. When lunch was over, all of the children were required to either sweep the classroom or go outside and sweep the leaves or pull out weeds." This routine was done daily.

Student A's teacher was a young female. He described her as being nice. When I asked him what she did when a child was being bad, he stated that

"Children are never bad in Africa." I asked him if he had ever seen another student be bad and he said "Just once or twice." The usual punishment for being bad was standing in the corner facing the wall for a long period of time. Another punishment was missing lunch. Student A went on to say that "if a student got really bad, the teacher would hit them".

Student A clearly recollects his transition to the United States. He said that he was very scared on the plane. When he first came to this country, he knew very little English. He was placed into a mainstream class and felt very "confused and uncomfortable". "I didn't know what was going on around me." He became very shy and withdrawn. But, as time went on he made friends and got a better grasp of the English language. It took him two years to fully learn English.

When I asked Student A if he is happier here or would rather be back in Africa, he said that he is happier here. But, he went on to say that sometimes he wishes he was back in Africa because everybody there is "the same". Sometimes other classmates tease him because he is African. "The teasing makes me not want to come to school some days."

Student A used to go to Arabic school four times a week after regular school. Arabic school is where they teach the religion of Islam. There are several Arabic schools within the neighborhood that I teach. "I really liked Arabic school a lot because I fit in there. Everybody there was like me." He stopped going to Arabic school when he turned nine. He does not know why. He said that he misses it.

**Student B**

Student B was a first grade student in my class three years ago. She was six when she came to this country. She is now nine years old. She comes from an extremely religious family and dresses in traditional African garb. She wears a headdress and long colorful African shirts. She is a very shy and timid little girl. It is very hard for her to look anybody in the eye.

Student B went to a small school on a hill. "My school had four classrooms and a little garden. My class had about twenty children in it." Her description of her school was much like that of Student A. Everything was very small, plain and dimly lit. Her textbooks were also binders.

Student B spoke of her school in a very positive light. When I asked her if she missed school life in Gambia, she looked down and said "yes". When I asked her what she did when school was over, her eyes lit up. "Me and my friends would run down the hill and play outside until it got dark. Then I would go inside and do my homework." She said that it is "prettier" in Africa. She was able to go outside and play for hours. She stated that she is not allowed to do that here.

Student B moved to the Bronx with her father three years ago. Her mother remained in Africa with her two sisters and little brother. They are still living in Gambia. Student B lives with her father and his new wife and their two babies. When I asked her where she liked living better, she quickly said "Africa." I asked her if she had been back to Africa since she moved, and she said no, but she wants to.

When Student B was in my class, she was frequently teased by other students. Early in the year, I sat down with my class and read them a beautiful book on Africa. It showed pictures of women, men and children wearing the same clothing that she wore. It showed what the schools and houses looked like as well. All of my students were intrigued. They became very interested in her culture. We discussed her headdress and I explained that it is part of her culture. From that point on, the other children in the class began to embrace this little girl and accept her for who she was.

**Student C**

Student C was seven years old when he moved to the United States. He has been living in the Bronx for the past three years. He is now ten years old. He lives with his mother, father and two younger brothers. Student C was a very

talkative and animated student. He spoke of his school life in Africa with wide eyes and strong words. His English was very impressive.

Student C went to a very small school in a rural area. The school was one level high with very small rooms. It consisted of five classrooms with fifteen to twenty children in each class. It was surrounded by a large garden that the students were expected to maintain. "My school was small and ugly. It looked like a little hut or a little house."

"I didn't want to go to school. But, my father sent me because somebody told him that I had to go. I didn't like it there. All the teachers were mean." When I asked Student C if he was ever bad in school and he quickly shook his head to say no. I asked him why he was so quick to say no and he said that he was afraid of being bad. "The teachers would do bad things to you if you were bad. They would take a ruler and hit you and they would make you stand in the corner all day."

A typical day for Student C consisted of a full day of instruction in different subject areas like reading and math. "Then, when school was over, we would go to the garden and pull out the weeds and rake the leaves. I hated to do that. It was boring." I asked when they had lunch, and surprisingly, he said that they did not receive lunch in school. "We didn't eat in school. We had to wait until we got home." I asked him if he used to get hungry in school and he nodded his head yes. "Sometimes I would be starving."

Student C clearly remembered how he felt when he first came to this country. He said that he was very scared. "I didn't know anybody and I felt different. I didn't know a lot of English, so I didn't really know what they were saying in class." He said that it took him a few months to feel comfortable in school.

Student C clearly stated that he is happier in the United States. "You can do more stuff here." I asked him what "stuff" he was referring to and he said "I can play and watch cartoons on t.v." His comment was a pretty sad commentary on our society. I asked him what else he could do here and he said "learn and get smarter". That was a more refreshing answer.

Student C has no desire to return to his country. "You have to do too much work there." I asked him if he meant school work or yard work and he said yard work. "We didn't do too much school work. We do more work here. A lot more work here. But they don't make us clean up outside here."

Student C does not attend Arabic school. "I don't want to go there." When I asked him why, he said, "I'm American. I'm not African anymore." That statement saddened me a bit. I asked him if he was proud to be African and he said "Sometimes. Sometimes I like to be African and sometimes I like to be American." Student C has clearly become very "Americanized" and does not want much to do with his heritage. This is not an uncommon attitude amongst African children.

**Student D**

Student D was a first grade student in my class last year. She moved from Gambia to the Bronx three years ago. She is now seven years old. She lives with her mother, father and three sisters. Her mother is expecting a baby within in the next few months.

All five family members (soon to be six) live in a two-bedroom apartment that is three blocks from the school. The four girls sleep on two sets of bunk beds in one small room. When I asked where the baby was going to sleep she said, "The baby will sleep with my mother and father in their room."

Student D is a well-adjusted student who appeared to be very comfortable at school. She took an active role in my classroom last year. She had many friends and fit right in with the rest of the class. She spoke English extremely well.

It was a bit harder to get information from Student D because she was only seven years old. When I asked her if she remembered anything about school in Gambia, she shook her head yes. "It was kind of little. Like a little square. My class only had like twenty kids in it. But, the room was little." I asked her if it looked anything like our school and she smiled and said no. "It was little and had a lot of grass outside. Our desks and our chairs looked different."

Student D was only four years old when she left Gambia, so I did not ask her any questions about academics or discipline in her school. When I asked her if she remembered what it was like coming to this country she immediately responded "It was scary. I went on an airplane." I asked her what it was like to go to school in a new country and she said "Kind of scary, but not too bad. I was in kindergarten with my friend from my building, so I had friends."

Student D's facial expressions and general demeanor expressed to me that she did not have many problems adjusting to New York City school life. She seemed very confident in herself. "I go to God School four times a week with my sisters and my friends. We learn Islam there. I am Muslim. We go after school. Sometimes we are there until ten at night!" God School is the same thing as Arabic School. I asked her if she liked going to God School and she said yes. "We get to learn and study and I can be with my friends."

I believe that a large part of the reason that Student D was so comfortable in public school is because of her participation in God School. She was not plunged right in to American society. Her parents allowed her to continue practicing the religion and customs that she followed in Gambia in the Bronx. She kept many of her African roots, while slowly incorporating new American customs into her life.

**Parent 1**

Parent 1 moved to this country thirteen years ago. He originally settled in Canada for about six months, but moved to the Bronx in hopes of better working opportunities. He has been living in the South Bronx for the past twelve and a half years. He is now forty-three years old.

Parent 1 is a school teacher in a public school down the street from my school. Two of his children attend my school. I first asked him why he chose to come to this country. "I came here for more money. I originally came to Canada with a student VISA. I am now an American citizen. I went to school to be a teacher, but it is extremely competitive in my country. There are eighteen

million people, and only three universities. Also, it is known in my country that the United States has the best education system."

Parent 1 stated that he felt "uncomfortable" when he first came to this country, but at the same time, he felt "blessed". "At first, I had menial jobs here. I was a security guard for a few years. I wasn't proud of that because I was educated to be a teacher. But, I did it to make money. I was a security guard at night, and went to classes during the day." Once he was qualified to be a teacher, he quit his job and began teaching at the school that he currently works at. He has been teaching there for three years.

Parent 1 gave me a very clear description of what school was like in Gambia. "Most schools in Gambia are very little. There are usually about six classes per school. Most schools are only one level high. Many have dwarf walls with iron sheets in between the ceiling and the roof. Each class contains anywhere from ten to forty-eight students per class, depending on the population of the area." He went on to explain that if there are not enough children enrolled in a grade, they often combine two grades into one class. "Some schools have many children, some schools have very few."

Parent 1 informed me that English is taught in all Gambian schools. "In Gambia, there are three main tribal languages, but English is most coveted. You may not speak your native dialect in school." A range of subjects are taught, but there is no primary focus on one subject area. "We do not prize reading and math like Americans do. We teach them, but we do not devote our whole day to them."

When I asked Parent 1 how they handled poor behavior in Gambian schools, he became very serious. "See, children do not act like they do here in Gambia. Nobody is bad. If they are bad, they will get punished. Punishment could be caning the children or making them sweep the classroom or yard." Parent 1 went on to say that he believes that we should engage in the same practices in the United States. "Teachers here can not do anything. We have no way to

control the children. I do not know with some of these children. This would never go on in Gambia."

When I asked Parent 1 what he thought would help ease the transition of Gambian children into the New York City public schools, he said, "Let children know about cultural differences. They are young. Their opinions about people have not yet been formed. Educate them."

Although Parent 1 believed that his children are receiving a better education in the United States, he informed me that he had to send his youngest son back to Gambia because he started to become a behavior problem here. "I sent him back to Gambia to live with my sister for a few years. He will come back when my sister says he is ready." That seems to be a common practice amongst Gambian parents. Poorly behaved children are often sent back to their country for a few years. I have had several students who were sent back to live with relatives a year or so after they were in my class. "As the children get older and become more like the other children, they begin to become bad. So we send them back."

**Parent 2**

Parent 2 moved to the South Bronx six years ago. She is now twenty-eight years old. Two of her daughters attend my school. One is a former student of mine. I asked Parent 1 how she was able to legally come to this country. "Every year, there is a VISA lottery in my country. You sign up for a number, and if your number is called, you come to this country." Parent 2 informed me that 55,000 people get the chance to come to the United States every year.

"I was so happy to come to this country. It is an honor. My children will have a better life here." Parent 2 has a child who suffers from several learning disabilities. She was a student in my class two years ago. She suffered from lead poisoning, microencephaly (abnormally small head circumference) and PICA. "Nobody did anything for my daughter in my country. They said she was

okay. I knew that she needed help." Fortunately, when she was my student, I was able to get her in to a special school for children with learning disabilities.

Parent 2 informed me that there is no special education system in Gambia. All students are treated as equal. There are only a few special schools for the deaf and the blind. Every other physical, emotional or mental disability is disregarded. "I used to see a little boy with no legs crawl to school on his hands. There was no special school for him."

Parent 2 stated that it is very expensive to go to school in Gambia. "You have to buy your children desks, chairs, books and uniforms. Also, they do not give you free lunch. You must pay for it." I asked Parent 2 what happened if you did not have enough money to send your child to school and she said that they would not go. School is not legally mandated in Gambia.

"My children go to God School four times a week. I send them there so they can remember their religion." I asked Parent 2 if she thought her children enjoyed God School, and she said yes. "They get to be with their friends and be with other children like them. I like it because they get to speak our language there. They teach them how to be good."

I asked Parent 2 if she could think of anything that might help ease the transition of Gambian children in New York City. "Maybe they could teach about Africa in school. They should get more African teachers." My school currently has six African teachers out of a staff of seventy-five teachers. I believe that they are a great asset to all the children in the school. They seem to comfort African children and they are great role models for all of the children.

**Strategies to Help Ease Transition**

Many of the strategies that I developed to help ease the transition of Gambian children came straight from my subjects. Both the children and the parents had very good ideas about how to make African children more comfortable in their new surroundings.

The first, and most important strategy is to provide all children with a multi-cultural education. There are children from countries and nations all over the world filtering in to every city in this country. There is a lot that American-born children can learn from them. Young children are like sponges. They absorb everything around them. Elementary school is the perfect time to educate children about different cultures and norms.

"In the early days, many teachers in primary schools thought that children would not be able or interested to learn about places that they have not directly experienced" (Goldstein, 2000, p.75). They thought their learning should only be focused on school and home environments. Things have changed. "Teachers have come to realize that children can receive huge amounts of information and get some direct experiences with places far away from their normal everyday lives" (Catling, 1995).

As I mentioned with Student B, children from Africa are often teased because they might look different than others. Other children are teasing them because of their lack of knowledge. Nobody has explained to them why they wear the clothing they do, and what a beautiful place Africa is.

A simple activity such a sitting down with a group of students and reading them a book on Africa will amaze young children. They are very interested to see what life is like in other places of the world. When I first did this activity with my class, my lesson turned into an afternoon discussion. All of my students were full of questions. I actively involved my African students by allowing them to answer many of the questions that the other students had. They were proud to speak about their culture and their country. The interaction was beautiful.

Another strategy, that is rather controversial, is to not completely immerse African children into English. I believe that African children should be taught in their native language while gradually learning English. Children learn English faster and are more likely to excel academically if they are given several years of instruction in their native language first (Hornblower & Blackman, 1995, p. 43).

In reality, it would be impossible to get African teachers in every school New York City to teach African children. But, this concept is not as hard as it sounds. All ESL (English as a second language) students in my school are pulled out from the classroom five times a week and are slowly taught the fundamentals of English. In this situation, non-English speaking students are not left in the classroom all day having no clue of what is going on. They are slowly being taught English with a group of five to six other African children.

Another situation that would comply with the idea of teaching African children in their home language and gradually immersing them into English is to allow African children to attend Arabic or God School after regular school instruction. All of the students that I interviewed, except for Student C, highly enjoyed attending Arabic School. They felt comfortable and at ease. They were free to speak their native language and engage in practices that they used to do in their homeland. It allowed them to keep a piece of Gambia in their hearts, and in to the new country that they had entered.

Another simple strategy that could be used in every classroom is to incorporate the technology of the internet into multi-cultural lessons. When going through the process of putting this research article together, I was amazed at the amount of information that I found on the internet. There are literally thousands of web-sites strictly devoted to Africa. Gambianet.com and AfricaOnline.com were two of the most resourceful web-sites that I found. Students can browse web pages and find pictures and information about any country that they would like.

## Conclusion

I have learned a lot of interesting information through my interviews with my subjects. I believe that I now have a much better understanding of what school life is like in Africa. The differences between school life in African and the United States is astounding. I now understand why African children come into New York City schools feeling lost and confused. They are being immersed into a

strange and unfamiliar culture. They do not know how to act or what is expected of them.

They key to making African students feel more comfortable in our schools is to educate other students about their culture and their customs. American children must be more tolerant and understanding. It is not only the African children that need to adjust their lifestyles, it is the American children as well.

## References


Catling, S. (1995). Good practices in the teaching of distant places. Retrieved January 14, 2002 from the World Wide Web: http://devon.gov.uk/dcs/geog/geoid/gambia/goodprac.htm

Feldman, R. (1998). Catch the wave. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 34(2), 162-165.

Gambia: Republic of the Gambia. Retrieved March 2, 2002 from the World Wide Web: http://www.hmnet.com/africa/gambia/gambia.html

Goldstein, A. (2000). The Africa Experiment. *Time*, 156(13), 74-76.

Hornblower, M. & Blackman, A. (1995). Putting tongues in check. *Time*, 146(15), 40-46.

Kennedy, J. (1998). From trauma to truth. *Christianity Today*, 42(5), 16-17.

Miller, D. (1999). Scholars of immigration focus on the children. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 45(22), 19-21.

Ramirez, D. (1999). Should bilingual schooling be silenced? *Time*, 146(15), 47-48.

Rogers, C. (2001). Child of Africa. *Skipping Stones*, 13(2), 20-21.

UNESCO. (1998). Higher Educations Systems Database: The Gambia. Retrieved March 2, 2002 from the World Wide Web: http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/globaled/wwcu/background/Gambia.html